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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000434

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/14/2019

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: AMINE GEMAYEL, GHATTAS KHOURY ON MARCH 14 STRATEGY

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Meeting with the Ambassador on April 14, Kataeb head Amine Gemayel of the March 14 coalition opposed the formation of a national unity government with a blocking third after June 7 elections. According to Gemayel, March 14 coalition leaders had agreed upon "95 percent" of electoral lists. Gemayel, however, was skeptical that all candidates running as independents would ally with March 14 after elections.

2. (C) In a separate meeting with the Ambassador the same day, March 14 member (and independent Chouf candidate) Ghattas Khoury expressed concern about the March 14 coalition's messaging in the run-up to the June 7 election. He described palpable Syrian influence in the country, highlighted by what he described as March 14 exclusion of outspoken anti-Syrian Christians on its electoral lists. Khoury professed to support March 14 goals before his own (although he presented his candidacy without senior March 14 leadership support). Khoury said that having gained signatures of support from 52 of the 55 Chouf mukhtars (mayors) for his candidacy, he would not withdraw from the race. Ambassador urged both Gemayel and Khoury to keep the focus on the big picture -- a victory for March 14 and moderate independents -- rather than on simple political party or solo candidate wins. End summary.

NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT
WITHOUT VETO

3. (C) According to Gemayel, March 14 leaders had not yet discussed as a bloc the possibility of participating in a national unity government after the June 7 election. Gemayel, however, shared March 14 leader Saad Hariri's concerns regarding a "blocking-third" for the minority, an arrangement that Gemayel argued made the minority as strong as the majority. Pointing to several examples of the current national unity government's inability to make decisions -- including its failure to pass the state budget or appoint the constitutional court -- Gemayel argued a new national unity government would provide more of the same. Veto authority

gave the minority power in the government without any share in the duties, he said.

¶4. (C) Khoury assessed that a national unity government, without a blocking third for the minority, could be possible.

He argued a clear majority was necessary to protect Lebanese sovereignty. He expressed concern that without a decisive victory for March 14 on June 7, the coalition would face difficulties when trying to form a government after elections.

"FLEXIBLE" INDEPENDENTS

¶5. (C) Gemayel expressed skepticism about March 14's ability to ensure the allegiance of "independent" candidates after the June 7 election. Citing former Prime Minister Najib Mikati -- an "independent" who reportedly will align with Hariri in Tripoli -- Gemayel said that Mikati was "for Mikati." Gemayel was unsure if Mikati had given assurances to Hariri regarding his post-election alliances, but Gemayel argued the position of Mikati and other independents would remain "vague." (Note: Septel covers Ambassador's April 14 meeting with Mikati. End note.)

¶6. (C) Gemayel noted that Mikati wanted to frame himself as the "alternate prime minister," who by straddling both sides of the political equation, was able to be called upon to form a compromise government. Regarding Minister of Trade and Economy Muhammed Safadi -- another Tripoli "independent" -- Gemayel assessed that Safadi's alliance with March 14 for the past four years indicated he probably would remain with the

BEIRUT 00000434 002 OF 004

coalition after June 7.

UNITY AMONG MARCH 14 LEADERSHIP?

¶7. (C) Gemayel emphasized that ongoing meetings between the four key March 14 leaders -- Sunni leader Saad Hariri, Druze chief Walid Jumblatt, Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea, and Gemayel -- required much courage. He noted that although "differences, problems, and contradictions" exist among the leaders, they have found "common priorities" in their goals: the preservation of Lebanese sovereignty and the removal of foreign influence and threats. After several meetings, including most recently on April 10, the coalition had agreed on 95 percent of electoral lists, Gemayel said.

¶8. (C) March 14 leaders now must strengthen solidarity within the coalition and among its supporters in order to ensure that March 14 candidate lists, in their entirety, are selected by voters. (Note: Lebanese elections are based on slate balloting. Voters may vote for an entire slate or may cross off some candidates' names and replace them with other March 14 or opposition candidates. End note.) Khoury also emphasized the need for March 14 to encourage their electorate to replace any crossed-out names with other March 14 candidates.

¶9. (C) Khoury, on the other hand, argued that Geagea and Gemayel were solely concerned about the number of seats their respective parties would win in the next parliament. Khoury said Geagea, for example, supported an Armenian dentist from Washington D.C. as the Armenian candidate in Ashrafieh instead of backing a more popular March 14 but non-LF Armenian politician. If the LF put forward its candidate, Khoury assessed that the 25 percent of Armenians, those who support March 14 in Ashrafieh, would not vote in the election.

¶10. (C) The Ambassador stressed to both Gemayel and Khoury that, particularly in such a close race, March 14 should continue intensive electoral efforts until the last moment. She also strongly and repeatedly counseled both Gemayel and Khoury against running March 14 candidates against each other, whether Kataeb versus LF or Kataeb/LF versus

independents, especially in Christian districts, where tight races will likely decide overall national election results. (Note: Ambassador will repeat the same message April 16 to Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea. Media outlet Tayyar.org reported April 15 that Ambassador was playing a conciliatory role among the March 14 forces given the "traffic" impeding March 14's finalization of its unified candidate lists. End note.)

¶11. (C) Khoury also expressed concern regarding March 14 messaging. During the recent Future Movement convention, Hariri stressed Lebanon's future and ways to improve economic, political, and social conditions, Khoury said. On the other hand, LF Geagea focused on the days of the civil war in order to revive his sometimes extreme Christian base. This message of the past and war does not appeal to the Lebanese youth who are deciding if they want to stay in the country and commit to its future, Khoury opined. Khoury then told the Ambassador that Jumblatt's upcoming May 1 Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) convention would emphasize support to the Palestinians as its theme. The Ambassador encouraged March 14 messaging to remain unified and focused on the end game: winning the election.

SYRIAN INFLUENCE STILL AT PLAY

¶12. (C) Citing Kataeb's historical role protecting Lebanese sovereignty -- a position that made the group a target for the Syrians -- Gemayel called a "miracle" his party's ability to counter Syrian influence. However, the Syrians still maintained influence in the country, especially in the army, security services, and education sectors, he said. Khoury mentioned Zahle, Metn, West Bekaa, and Koura as nests of

BEIRUT 00000434 003 OF 004

Syrian influence.

¶13. (C) Khoury pointed to the Christian candidates that he said March 14 had decided not to include on their lists -- Samir Franjeh in Zgharta, Elias Atallah in Tripoli, Antoine Androus in Baabda-Aley, Faris Soueid in Jbeil, and Khoury in the Chouf -- and noted the anti-Syrian positions of all. Khoury argued that those who had been outspoken against Syria had lost coalition backing. He worried the exclusion of outspoken anti-Syrian candidates indicated March 14 had lost its "spirit of fighting."

KHOURY FOR MARCH 14

¶14. (C) Khoury stressed throughout his meeting with the Ambassador that his priority remained the success of the March 14 coalition, not of himself. Were his continued candidacy in the Chouf to endanger March 14 electoral chances in the district, he would withdraw immediately, but that would cause 30 percent of Christian voters in the Chouf to support the opposition, he claimed. Khoury presented the Ambassador with an appeal signed by 52 of the 55 mukhtars (mayors) in the Chouf district appealing to Walid Jumblatt to include Khoury on his list. Jumblatt had ignored the petition, but Khoury plans to leak the paper to media sources soon.

NASRALLAH-EGYPT SPAT WONT HURT AOUN

¶15. (C) Describing Aoun as a "demagogue" who, in the eyes of his followers, could do no wrong, Gemayel assessed the General would experience little fallout from the antagonistic rhetoric between Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Gemayel described as a "mystery" Aoun's ability to "hypnotize" his followers. Gemayel also noted Hizballah's skillful handling of the electoral alliance; Hizballah has allowed Aoun to appear to his

Christian supporters as a decision-maker in his alliance with Hizballah, Gemayel said.

¶16. (C) The Ambassador assured Gemayel that recent U.S. outreach in the region would not occur at the expense of Lebanon. Gemayel, however, expressed concern that Lebanese popular perception of U.S. outreach benefited the opposition at the expense of March 14. Syria's allies in Lebanon are depicting U.S. and French outreach to Syria as an acknowledgment by the West that its policy of isolation had failed. The Syrians are saying the U.S. "needs" us, Gemayel said, and the Lebanese are listening. Opening to Syria is seen as the "new alternative" in the West and, increasingly, in Lebanon, Gemayel opined. For his part, Khoury noted that March 14 had not presented a strong unifying Christian leader to counter Aoun.

COMMENT

¶17. (C) Fifty-three days until election, March 14's unity continues to be less than ideal. Although Gemayel presented a positive picture of agreement in the bloc, we continue to hear that he and fellow March 14 Christian leader Samir Geagea are in conflict as they promote their parties' candidates for spots in the March 14 electoral lists. In the case of Khoury, it is very possible that he is overstating his appeal in the Chouf district because March 14 leaders Hariri and Jumblatt left him off the March 14 list there. Even if he is exaggerating, though, surely Hariri and Jumblatt would prefer that Khoury accept their decision rather than continue to promote his candidacy, potentially drawing attention and supporters away from March 14 candidates. We will continue to urge March 14/independent moderates to display unity in messaging and in candidate lists in each of our meetings with our interlocutors. End comment.

BEIRUT 00000434 004 OF 004

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